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May News from Welaka National Fish Hatchery

Welaka NFH Hosts 22nd Annual Kid's Fishing Rodeo

Tucked away on the St. Johns River is the town of Welaka, Florida. Welaka isn't very big and you have to want to go there to find it. And, it is a place worth finding. The inhabitants of Welaka number near 700, but in this small town is a hidden gem known as the Welaka National Fish Hatchery.

The Fish Hatchery has developed a long standing connection with the folks of Welaka and the surrounding communities by hosting a Kid's Fishing Rodeo. Saturday April 15th, the hatchery hosted its 22nd annual Kid's Fishing Rodeo. At the rodeo, kids are allowed to fish in two of the hatchery ponds that are stocked for the event. This much loved event saw participants arriving nearly two hours before the fishing began. A total of 273



Prize winners

kids with nearly as many parents spent a beautiful Saturday morning fishing for Channel Catfish and Bluegill. Participants in the rodeo received a free fishing rod and reel combo, and are encouraged to keep the fish they catch to take home to eat.

The goals of the rodeo are one: to have kids learn that fishing is fun and two: fish are a great source of protein and readily available in the many lakes and rivers surrounding Welaka. By giving the kids a great experience fishing, we also hope to encourage the future men and women who will one day be looking after our natural resources. The Hatchery has several partners that assist in the rodeo to make it a safe and successful event. The hatchery staff would like to thank the town of Welaka and its police department for managing traffic through the hatchery during the event and for donating some of the fishing poles. Long time emcees Mike Ditto and Bob Williams were on hand to

entertain the crowds and weigh in the fish the kids catch.



Mike and Bob emceeing the rodeo

Finally, the information most folks always want to know is; what is the largest fish caught and what the heaviest stringer of fish was. One young man caught a 12+ pound catfish, while another caught a stringer weighing in a little over 57 pounds. As mentioned earlier, we want the kids to have a GREAT time and BIG fish is one way to ensure that.



This young man caught a nice Bluegill.



Everyone enjoying the fishing derby

Phase I Striped Bass Season Comes to a Close

The team at Welaka National Fish Hatchery has spent April and May spawning, growing out, harvesting and stocking out Sunshine Bass (hybrid cross between a female White Bass and a male Striped Bass) and both Atlantic and Gulf run Striped Bass for the St Johns River and the Apalachicola River systems respectively.

Welaka NFH spends part of the year assisting Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission by rearing Sunshine Bass for the St. Johns River. Sunshine Bass fry were obtained from Blackwater Fish Hatchery and stocked out in ponds at the Welaka Unit of the hatchery. These fish are sought after by anglers for their fight at the end of a fishing line as well as their palatability at the dinner table. Four hatchery ponds were able to produce nearly 80,000 Sunshine Bass for the river.

Above average winter temperatures and extremely low river flows made collecting brood fish difficult resulting in only two Gulf run Striped Bass being spawned at Welaka NFH. The fry produced from these fish were shipped to Warm Spring National Fish Hatchery in Georgia to help them meet their commitments.

Welaka NFH did receive Gulf run Striped Bass fry from Blackwater Fish Hatchery in Florida that allowed us to stock two hatchery ponds. The hatchery crew was able to harvest over 27,000 phase I fingerlings to be stocked in Lake Talquin, in the panhandle of Florida.

It seemed that all of our partners had trouble getting brood fish this season, meaning that other hatcheries that normally ship us several million of Atlantic run fry were only able to ship about a million fry this season. From these fry, the Welaka National Fish Hatchery was able stock out over 100,000 phase I Atlantic Striped Bass into the St. Johns River. The hatchery staff retained about 60,000 phase I fish for our phase II program. These fish will be cultured until they are between seven to eight inches in length and then will be harvested this coming winter and hauled to South Carolina for stocking in designated waters that are yet to be determined.

We hope that next year will bring cooler winter temperature and better flows to achieve our stocking goals and even produce extra fish to make up for this year.



Phase II Striped Bass in ponds

Welaka National Fish Hatchery Celebrates Earth Day with Dunns Creek State Park

What started off in 1970 as a protest against poor environmental practices, Earth Day (now 47 years old) is now more of a celebration of environmental accomplishments that have led to a healthier earth. Welaka National Fish Hatchery was able to celebrate Earth Day at Dunns Creek State Park in Pomona Park, Florida.

The hatchery, along with the 4-H Swampgator Archery team, set up a booth at Dunns Creek State Park's 2nd annual Earth Day event, to show case the efforts of the hatchery to connect lands and waters to sustain fish, wildlife and plants by being visionary leaders, bold innovators and trusted partners, working with and for people. As visitors stopped by the booth, they learned how the hatchery is working to sustain Striped Bass in the St. Johns River and the Apalachicola River system. The Swampgators were there to promote



Dunns Creek and Dunns Creek State Park is a great place to celebrate Earth Day.

their archery club that meets and practices at the hatchery. By getting youth outdoors to participate in archery they are also learning about the hatchery and our mission.

Guests at this Earth Day event numbered around 350 which were twice as many as the organizers were expecting. This only leaves the question of how many will be in attendance next year. Stay tuned...



Welaka NFH Project Leader Ken Blick and Swampgator Archer Stasi Brady pose with "William Bartram" who helped discover and wrote about the Dunns Creek area.